The Buddha's Death (Mahāparinibbāna Sutta)

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As we're coming toward the close of the retreat, I thought it would be fitting to look at the last of the Buddha's teachings, the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, known as the Buddha's Last Days.

Nibbāna, as you know, describes the state experienced by those who are enlightened. The fires of passion extinguish themselves in Nibbāna, and so "extinguishing" is one translation for the term. If this seems like a bleak goal for the spiritual life, we have Bhikkhu Ṭhānissaro's assurance that in the Buddha's time it was believed an extinguished fire went into a state of potential, liberated from its location to suffuse the whole universe with its energy. This ties in with alternative translations for Nibbāna such as unbinding, liberation, freedom, the deathless, the unborn. And of course we have positive descriptions of Nibbāna as perfect happiness and contentment.

The Buddha entered the state of Nibbāna when he fully understood the Four Noble Truths as he sat under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya. He then taught others how to come to the same understanding for over four decades until, aged eighty, his body dies and he enters the state known as Parinibbāna. This term refers to Nibbāna after the dissolution of the five aggregates. Unenlightened beings like us cling to these aggregates of body and mind in the mistaken belief that these constitute our essential being. The Buddha ceased clinging at Bodh Gaya, but his transcendent knowledge and understanding could still manifest within the world through these aggregates. At the moment of death, his transcendence became completely non-manifest, untraceable.

The Buddha does not answer questions of the form, "Does the Buddha exist after death?" The state of the Buddha is beyond measure, he says, so it is meaningless to speak of this in terms of existence or non-existence. The Parinibbāna Sutta does not try to unpick this conundrum, nor does it attempt any description of Nibbāna or Parinibbāna, but simply reports the facts of the Buddha's last days.

Most commentators agree that the Sutta has been embroidered by devotees who wished to remember the Buddha in exalted terms. For example, he is said to have transported himself over the river Ganges along with all his order of monks. He later caused an earthquake by revoking his will to live and another as he died. Muddy waters miraculously cleared to let him drink, his skin glowed brighter than gold, and flowers bloomed out of season to honour him on his deathbed. There are seemingly pointless stories of people locking their chariot wheels as they vie to have him attend their house for a meal, almost as the paparazzi pursue modern-day celebrities.

As against this, there are many credible and inspiring descriptions of his last days, which we can use as a teaching on closure—how we might hope to end our own lives. And of course, we can practice on a

smaller scale, using this as a model of how to take our leave from any activity, even from this retreat.

At the start of the Sutta, there is no talk of his impending death. It seems he is just doing what he had spent the past decades doing, going from place to place, teaching the Dhamma. Despite his frail old body, he is almost constantly on the road during these last days. He starts out in Vulture's Peak, and we are told of seventeen stopping points before he reaches his final resting place at a grove of sal trees at Kushinara. I was fortunate enough to have visited Vulture's Peak and the sal grove when on pilgrimage with Bhante and others in 2006. The distance between them is almost two hundred miles. Even in the comfort of a saloon car it was a long journey. Imagine the energy and resolve involved in doing that on foot as an eighty-year-old in chronic pain and with a body that was just about holding together.

To follow the Buddha's example is not just to sit on our cushions. We must also give ourselves wholeheartedly to whatever activities we choose to do in the service of others.

Much of the main drama of the Sutta happens in Vesālī, the region where the Buddha had found his first meditation teacher. He also returned here after enlightenment to teach and establish monastic settlements. It is in Vesālī that the business of the Buddha's death starts to loom large. He makes his final rains retreat here. During the retreat he becomes very ill and realizes he's in danger of death. He considers it would be unfitting to die in this way without having taken proper leave of his disciples. And so we are told he made a tremendous effort to summon the will to live and thereby overcame his sickness.

This is a good illustration of the Buddha's care for individuals and not just for humanity at large. It would have been easy to throw in the towel. He had accomplished his mission to achieve enlightenment and teach others how to follow in his footsteps. He had achieved all his broader goals. But he was also concerned for the particular, for Ānanda and his companions. He didn't want them finding out news of his death while they were on retreat themselves, with all the confusion that would cause. He wanted to die in a way that would minimize trouble for those he was leaving behind.

The great effort the Buddha made to overcome this illness is also a sober reminder to get our own affairs in order so that our death will cause minimal disturbance to others—making a will, tackling thorny issues like end-of-life care, and deciding how much intervention we want. These aren't easy matters to address, but any headway we can make is our best attempt to follow the Buddha's example of caring for others up to and beyond the point of our death.

Happily the Buddha was able to overcome his illness. Afterwards Ānanda tells the Buddha how distressed he had been to see the Buddha so near death. The only thought that consoled him, he said, was that he was sure the Buddha would not die without making a statement about who should lead the monks after his death.

The Buddha seems surprised by this, asking, "What does the Order expect of me?" For himself, he says, he doesn't think of the Order in terms of needing a leader. Instead, he advises that you should live like islands

unto yourselves, be your own refuge, with no one else as your refuge, with the Dhamma as your refuge and no other refuge.

Thus, he doesn't try to extend his influence over the Order beyond his own lifetime. He fully accepted the limitations of his human form. The Order might be expecting him to look into the future and work out what would be best, but he has no such God-like view of himself. Having done his job of teaching and leading, he's now going to let go completely. He leaves no clear authority structure and instead asks that each person take responsibility for their own liberation, using the Dhamma as their guide. This empowers everyone to get on with the job themselves and guards against the corrupting effect of power.

A very wise and trusting approach to the future of the Dhamma. He is leaving it up to all of us to carry on his life's work, which is an inspiring thought.

As if to stress the limitations of his earthly form and drive home that people need to take full responsibility for their own liberation and not look on him as some form of God, the Buddha describes his body as old and worn out. Just as an old cart is made to go by being held together with straps, so the Tathāgata's body is kept going by being strapped up.

We might think that the enlightened state would somehow let the Buddha float above problems like the aches and pains of old age. Although he didn't identify himself with these limitations, he was intimately aware of them and tells Ānanda that the only time his body feels comfortable is when he withdraws his attention from mundane matters to enter a state of deep concentration, devoid of perceptions.

There are a couple of points worth reflecting on here. Firstly, the Buddha was normally attending to mundane matters and had to deliberately withdraw attention in order to give his body some comfort. Enlightenment obviously doesn't mean living in a cloud of bliss, disconnected from the world. The freedom of Nibbāna can be found within the mundane.

Sometimes we confuse Nibbāna, or the path to Nibbāna, with very exalted states we might touch upon in meditation. While these give us wonderful glimpses of the potential for our human mind, we can overvalue them and then reject ordinary life as worthless by comparison. It helps us counter this natural preference for meditative bliss when we reflect that the enlightened mind of the Buddha was normally engaged with the mundane details of life—seeing whatever was in front of his eyes, tasting his food, noticing memories and perceptions registering in consciousness, feeling the pain of his eighty-year-old body.

Enlightenment does not protect the Buddha from pain. The only difference between his experience of pain and ours is that he would not have added to the problem with any emotional turmoil. He wouldn't have got irritable or exasperated or felt hard done by. He could continually find the escape from suffering within the experience of an aching body. Thus he could accept the pain, discomfort, indignity and other limitations of ageing with serene equanimity.

Pain and sickness can make us feel very vulnerable. We lose that all-important sense of being in control of our bodies, directing the show. The path to enlightenment involves the very humbling lesson that we cannot escape the horrors of illness except by getting close to that sense of horror, watching it dissolve moment after moment in the light of awareness. In the midst of our illness, we can encourage ourselves with the thought that the Buddha experienced exactly this kind of challenge and somehow found peace within it, as well as the determination to continue on his long and arduous last journey.

The next stop on that journey is at the Kapāla shrine, where he and Ānanda go after their alms round on the following day. The Buddha remarks on the beauty of the shrine and names the many other shrines he finds delightful in this region of Vesālī. Although his body is old and worn out, and he's only just recovered from an illness that brought him close to death, he now declares that it would be within his power to live for a full century.

We're told he makes this declaration several times at different shrines around Vesālī. In one breath he remarks on the beauty of the place, and in the next declares that he could live out a full century. Each time, we are told, the Buddha was giving Ānanda a hint to request that he live for another twenty years. Had Ānanda taken the hint, the Buddha would then have assented to his friend's request.

There are a couple of points here worth reflecting on. One is to note the importance that muditā plays in the Buddha's life. Muditā is one of the four brahmavihāras, so it's hardly surprising to find him practising this in his last days. And yet it is worth reflecting on the implications more deeply.

We can take it that the Buddha didn't need earthly beauty to be perfectly happy. He had transcended suffering and would have been quite equanimous in a slimy pit. Why then does he take the trouble to notice and admire what he considered beautiful, take delight in it, and comment so frequently on it?

Muditā energises us. Think of how your heart lifts when you see a beautiful vista, how vibrant you suddenly feel. It's the same for the Buddha. Although his default position is equanimity, he needs supportive conditions to feel joy and let that invigorate his body and mind. He is perhaps more human than we let ourselves believe.

At eighty years of age and following a serious illness, his life energy is running low. Moved by the beauty of the shrines at Vesālī, muditā moves him to declare that he could, if necessary, maintain the will to live a further twenty years.

If muditā could spur the Buddha's will to live, it can surely generate very beneficial energies within us—helping us bear with difficulties, lifting our hearts for some arduous task, inspiring us to better things. Often we feel so overburdened by our troubles that we don't spend any time appreciating nature, architecture, music, or any kind of art. The Parinibbāna Sutta encourages us to connect with the delightful aspects of the world. Let them lift our hearts.

Tomorrow afternoon, after you've been liberated from the rigours of the retreat, spend some time really

looking at things—flowers, trees, the view, or any of the statuary here at Satipañña. You never know how this might repay you when you're trying to overcome a deathly illness.

When I was recovering from laryngectomy, anxiety was like a transistor radio blaring in my ear. But when I looked at a flower, the radio switched itself off momentarily. As I gazed out my window at a tree, it was as if all those jarring notes were being absorbed within its branches and leaves. Although I didn't think of this in terms of survival and rekindling the will to live, in retrospect I can see that these moments of relative ease possibly gave my body the rest it needed to recover.

Another point to acknowledge is the value of our human relationships. If a good friend asks us to do something, this can spur us well beyond what we would otherwise be prepared to do. The Buddha's need for Ānanda to request that he live on to his potential lifespan of a hundred years gives us further evidence that transcendence did not make him all-powerful. Supportive conditions, such as the request of a friend, were also needed to maintain his life energy.

If the Buddha could need a friend to spur his resolve, how much more do we need good friends to spur us on? Any time and effort we spend on developing friendships within our sangha is time spent on our path to freedom. We want to be connected to people who will bring out the best in us.

It's also worth noting the wisdom in the Buddha's leaving it up to Ananda to make the request that he live a further twenty years. My grandfather used to say, "If a thing is worth having, it's worth asking for."

Doubtless, there would have been value in the Buddha living for longer. He would have helped hundreds, possibly thousands of people. But he had to die sometime. There was always going to be some limit on the good he could do on earth. He wasn't one to take on hardship to no avail. When he first considered teaching, he decided against it, believing that people wouldn't understand him and so he would only be wearing himself out for no good reason, exasperating himself. Although an enlightened being does not suffer, neither do they choose hardship unless there is good reason.

Likewise, we can be judicious in what we offer to others, taking our needs and limitations into account. It is generous to do many acts of kindness quietly without waiting to be asked. But when the task is arduous, it's best to follow the Buddha's lead and just hint that we could do this. Generosity needs to be balanced by wisdom. Otherwise, we could expend much of our life energy doing work that others aren't ready to support or value, and which might therefore be a waste of effort.

Back to the sutta now, where Ananda fails to take the Buddha's hint and makes no request that the Buddha live to his full century. I can imagine the Buddha smiling quietly at that. The path is now cleared for his Parinibbāna.

The next step is for the Buddha to relinquish the will to live. At this point, Māra, the personification of evil in Buddhism, makes his final appearance in the Buddha's life, trying to get the Buddha to make a hasty exit into Parinibbāna. Though the scriptures always personify Māra as an evil being who tempts the

Buddha, we can also see this in more mundane terms, as the last vestiges of desire within the Buddha himself. And this last temptation of the Buddha is for Nibbāna.

Those of you who saw Martin Scorsese's film *The Last Temptation of Christ* will know that Scorsese imagines Christ to be tempted by the desire for life. In the Buddha's case, his last temptation was not for life, but for escape from the round of life and death. Having accomplished all that was expected of a Buddha, Māra tempts him to bask in the perfect contentment and peace of Nibbāna. But to succumb to this final desire would be to grasp at Nibbāna, to see it as mine, a state that could be contained within the Buddha's humanity.

Needless to say, the Buddha doesn't fall for this. Normally he vanquishes Māra vigorously, first and foremost by detecting the presence of Māra and then by expounding the Dhamma to show how Māra's temptations are no match for the Buddha's wisdom. The vanquished Māra slinks off in misery. For example, in one description, Māra is left silent, dismayed, with shoulders drooping and head down, glum, with nothing to say, scraping the ground with a reed.

Curiously, in this last bout between the pair, the Buddha is uncharacteristically accommodating. He simply says, "You need not worry, evil one. The Buddha's passing will not be long delayed." We can take this as a suggestion for how we might deal with our own desires for enlightenment. We don't have to quash these out of hand as we might a desire for sense pleasure. We can take a gentler approach, recognising the worthy aim of the desire while refusing the temptation to grasp.

Let's take a practical example. Striving for insight is an experience we probably all go through. Let's see how a modified version of the Buddha's response might help, repeating to ourselves, "Do not worry, evil one, insight will come in its own time."

I tried this out one time when I felt myself straining to get on top of things, trying to see how I was causing so much dukkha for myself. Repeating the phrase helped me see my experience from a more objective point of view. Grasping at insight was experienced as physical tension manifesting at several points of my body—the diaphragm, the chest, throat, and face. It was almost as if there was a gigantic hand stretching upwards inside my body, clutching at a stream of very unpleasant sensations that were shooting upwards towards my head. It seemed so imperative that I catch these sensations, holding one of them long enough to get a good look at it.

After a few moments, the phrase "evil one" gave me pause for thought. Why was this grasping really evil? Fear and aversion surfaced as I considered this. To my surprise, the grasping diminished somewhat, as if cowed by the judgment "evil." By now I could see the link between this exercise and one of the steps in the sutta we considered a few nights ago on the removal of distracting thoughts. You may remember the step where we condemn ourselves harshly for the distraction, even imagining a carcass being slung around our necks. The phrase "evil one" was having a similar effect, quelling the unskilful desire, holding it in check so it could be examined objectively.

By comparison, the phrase "do not worry" had a soothing effect and helped me consider the concept "evil one" in a more balanced way. I could sense the judgment as valid, seeing the dukkha I was creating by grasping and how unskilful this was. However, it wasn't a total self-condemnation. The grasping was just one portion of my experience. The effort to say the phrase "do not worry" was separate from the grasping and was sensed as caring and wise.

Thus the phrase "do not worry, evil one" had the effect of showing me the dukkha being caused by grasping. Although the concept "evil one" stirred fear and judgment, this was being used to avail, clarifying where my problem lay. The second half of the reflection—"insight will come in its own time"—helped me to step back and get a wider view of my experience. I noticed a mental image of light which appeared to be glowing gently above my head. This, I sensed, represented the insight I was grasping after.

I felt the sadness of being unable to make direct contact with that gentle light. It seemed always out of reach. But some comfort trickled through as I repeated the phrase, "Insight will come in its own time." The comfort seemed to emanate from the light itself. Once I stopped grasping after it, the light became a compassionate warm glow, softening the stinging sensations of grief.

As the meditation evolved, I found myself making peace with my current level of understanding. I felt deeply grateful for every scrap of it—every moment where I stopped grasping and let my imperfect wisdom soothe me, reassure me that I was on the right path.

It might also be useful to try out this exercise if you sense any grief at the closing of the retreat or any dread of going back into the big bad world. This grief or dread represents a tendency to grasp whatever peace, clarity, mettā, or other form of goodness you touched upon during the retreat. There is wisdom in the desire for these qualities, so you don't want to condemn the desire itself. Wise desire is termed *chanda* in Pali, to distinguish it from the unwise desire for sense pleasures, fame, success, and so on. Those unskillful desires are termed *taṇhā*, and these are the ones that lead to suffering. *Chanda*, on the other hand, energises our path to freedom.

And yet, grasping after beautiful states of mind brings suffering. Clarity and mettā and all such states come and go depending on conditions. So you might like to experiment with the phrase, "Do not worry, evil one—there will be another retreat next year," and see whether that helps you face into the world outside of Satipañña. But always remember that vipassanā is your primary tool in dealing with any emotional disturbance. This is just a suggestion that might help you tweak yourself in the right direction. It's a form of self-care, finding the appropriate reflection to help you through a challenging situation.

Back to the Buddha's last days now, where having soothed Māra in this final exchange between them, he is then able to renounce his will to live in a perfectly equanimous way. He then announces to Ānanda and the other disciples that he will pass away in three months' time.

All of this part of the story—the rains retreat, his sickness, his comments on beauty, his offer to live to a century, his last exchange with Māra, and his renunciation of the will to live—happened in Vesālī. We are told that as he leaves the region, he gazed on it with an elephant's look, meaning that he turned his full body around to look behind him, just as an elephant has to do if it wants to look behind. After this long gaze, he tells Ānanda that this is the last time he will see Vesālī.

The Buddha wasn't one for idle chatter, so we can assume this comment and his elephant's look were poignant expressions of appreciation and farewell. So many of the Buddha's teachings hammer home the need not to attach ourselves to anything in the phenomenal world. But that's not to say we distance ourselves from the world, disdaining what it offers. Enlightenment hasn't removed the Buddha from the earth, neither in terms of the aches and pains of old age nor the beauty he finds in Vesālī. His Buddha nature participates fully in his humanity.

This reflection provides another encouragement not to neglect mundane reality in our search for enlightenment. We engage fully in the world. It's where we find our path to freedom. We can afford to get fond of whatever places or people or aspects of the world that enrich our lives. The only thing we have to keep reminding ourselves is that all delight depends on a multitude of conditions beyond our control. It will all fall apart someday. We have to find the courage to appreciate and enjoy and love all the wholesome but ephemeral pleasures of the world.

Saying farewell is perhaps the most challenging aspect of appreciation. The Buddha's elephant look towards Vesālī gives us a clear indication not to fudge on this, so intent on our next move that we ignore what we're leaving behind. Saying goodbye is a poignant muditā practice.

Having said his farewell to Vesālī, the Buddha spends the next three months travelling from place to place in the manner he had done since he started teaching. In Pāvā, he eats a meal which gives him food poisoning. The next day, obviously very ill, he succeeds in making his way to Kusinārā, where he will die. Next time you're suffering the indignity of vomiting and diarrhoea, you might comfort yourself with the thought that this was how the Buddha died—so you're in good company.

The sutta suggests that Kusinārā was a quiet rural region, and Ānanda remonstrates with the Buddha for choosing such a miserable little backwater of a place in which to die. He urges him to go to one of the great cities instead, declaring that would be a more fitting place for the Buddha to die.

Although Ānanda grieved sorely at the Buddha's passing, his understanding of the Dhamma told him that parinibbāna was something to celebrate. This sentiment was captured in one of the verses written after the Buddha's death, which we chant every morning as part of the Vipassanā verses: "All conditioned things are impermanent. It is their nature to arise and pass away. Having arisen, they disappear. Their cessation is happiness."

Wouldn't it be wonderful to live from such wisdom? To know that death is the deepest happiness. We

could give ourselves fully into every activity, every relationship, enjoy all wholesome aspects of life to the full, knowing that the truest bliss will come when all this activity fades away. It really is to get the best of both worlds.

Ānanda, however, was not fully enlightened. The verse he uttered on the Buddha's passing confessed his suffering: "Terrible was the quaking, men's hair stood on end, when the all-accomplished Buddha passed away."

Before we come to that best of both worlds wisdom, we bear witness to the dukkha that results from attaching ourselves to anything in this world of phenomena.

Perhaps to symbolise this, the Buddha rejects Ananda's wish for him to celebrate Parinirvana in the style of earthly splendour, in a big city surrounded by pomp and circumstance. Likewise, he turns his back on the more refined beauties of the world, symbolised by the shrines of Asali and other centres where he had lived, established monasteries, and taught. He chooses instead the relative obscurity of Kusinara for his final release. Perhaps this was to symbolise that the path leads forever onwards, beyond what is already established, into the unknown, into silence, the quiet peace of Nibbana.

At one point during this last day of the Buddha's life, Ananda can no longer contain his grief and withdraws to a quiet spot to weep. When the Buddha hears of this, he summons him, telling him not to grieve, reminding him that all earthly phenomena, no matter how dear, must pass away. This is tough love, but his next comments show a deep sensitivity toward the grieving process. He praises Ananda for his services: "For a long time, Ananda, you have been in the Buddha's presence, showing loving kindness in acts of body, speech, and mind, beneficially, blessedly, wholeheartedly, and unstintingly." He commends the way Ananda has administered his work: "Monks, Ananda is wise. He knows when it is the right time for monks to come and see the Buddha, when it's the right time for nuns, for lay people, for kings, and so on." He then lauds Ananda's many endearing qualities, telling how people are always pleased to see him, delighted when he speaks to them, disappointed if he is silent.

When we grieve someone's passing, we unwittingly diminish our own value. Psychologically, we let our strength and happiness die with them, projecting all our good qualities onto the dying person. Working our way through grief is to recover our confidence, our self-worth. The Buddha hastens Ananda's recovery in this public expression of appreciation, praise, and admiration for his friend. In this parting kindness to Ananda, the Buddha leaves us with the conundrum of anatta: we need to cherish ourselves in order to see through the delusion of self.

Before we let the Buddha take his final breath, let's look back at some of the points we can take from this discourse.

Firstly, it gives us a picture of the Buddha as a very real human being. His enlightened state is fully incarnate in the world. It does not shield him from aches and pains or from unexpected and untimely

illness. Neither does it leave him immune to the beauty of the world or the joy of friendship. These are needed to fuel his energy and will to live. See if you can find occasions for mudita during these last days of the retreat. If there are any aspects of Satipañña which helped you along—the shrine or walking rooms, some restful spot in the meadows, your favourite walking path, the stupa or any of the statues that meant something to you—spend a few moments acknowledging these, expressing gratitude for whatever way they inspired you. When leaving, turn back, elephant style, to say farewell.

We can also remember the Buddha's last days as a contemplation on sickness, ageing, and death. Within our imagination we might be all powerful, but these provide objective limitations on what we can achieve in the world. The really good news is that provided we give things our best shot, we can take these limitations as a gift. We can bow out delighted that the struggle is over and that we can now relax and let go.

The Sutta shows the important role Ananda played in the Buddha's life. Much of what we know about the Buddha comes from the long conversations he has with Ananda. He tells him what is on his mind, uses him as a sounding board, and comforts him in his grief. We can let ourselves be inspired by their relationship. Over these last days, you might spend time thinking of your friends, especially those with whom you share the spiritual path. You could vow to develop these friendships and share the merits of your retreat with them.

Despite all the evidence of the Buddha's love for and appreciation of the people and places that played a role in his life, his last temptation was not for life, but for the peace and bliss of Nibbana. Remembering this, we incline our minds to that ultimate bliss and encourage ourselves to find happiness in letting go. But the Buddha didn't give in to Mara's last temptation for him to bow out early. He maintained his mission to teach the Dhamma right up to the end, answering questions, advising people on specific points, giving Dhamma talks.

It is said that at the very last moments of his life, his disciples all fell silent. Three times he asked if there were any more questions, but no one voiced any. With that, the Buddha uttered his last words: "All compound things have the nature to decay. Strive diligently for your liberation."

With that, the Buddha took his last breath. His enlightened state was no longer incarnate within the five aggregates of body and mind through which he had lived his life and been known by others. The Sutta goes on to describe the ceremonies that followed and the division of the relics of his body, but I think the Buddha's last breath is the best point at which to take our leave.

As we contemplate his Parinibbana, we may, in part, feel the anxiety and sorrow of Ananda. Another part of us might rejoice in the wisdom of the Vipassana verse, which declares that true happiness comes when all things pass away. Torn between these extremes, we might feel stuck and confused. All of this—our wisdom and our many layers of delusion—is witnessed by the untraceable.

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